

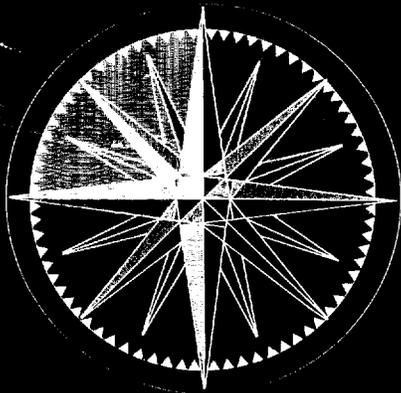
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# SPECIAL REPORT

BELGIUM'S LIBERAL PARTY

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
OFFICE OF CURRENT INTELLIGENCE

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**BELGIUM'S LIBERAL PARTY**

Inherent instabilities in the Belgian political situation enable the relatively small Liberal party to exercise an influence out of proportion to its size. Very conservative in its outlook and somewhat at odds with US policy on a number of past issues, the party has wielded this domestic influence partly through its ties with the financial world and partly by exploiting its balance-of-power position between the two big parties--the Roman Catholic Social Christian Party (PSC) and the Socialist Party (PSB). During the past two years it has been extensively reorganizing in an effort to broaden its electoral appeal, and it probably hopes that recent dissension in the Social Christian - Socialist coalition government will provide an opportunity for Liberals to hold cabinet office again.

Political Situation

Several factors in the Belgian scene combine to allow the Liberal party an important role. The system of proportional representation almost invariably prevents any party from achieving a majority; coalition governments have been the rule since 1919. The long-standing and recently intensified dispute between the French-speaking Walloons and Dutch-speaking Flemings (see inset box) ensures that almost any coalition government will rest on hobbling compromises. The two major parties are also divided by historic differences on clericalism and by current issues in economic policy. In this situation, any coalition has difficulty in taking effective or decisive action and tends to break down.

This instability has provided the Liberals with several opportunities in the last dec-

ade to bargain successfully for a place in the government. In the PSB-Liberal coalition of 1954-58, for example, the Liberals gained seven of the 16 cabinet posts, while holding

**BELGIUM'S LINGUISTIC DISPUTE**

Historically, the Walloons of Belgium's southern provinces were more prosperous than the Flemings, and French was the only language of public administration, the law courts, and higher education, thus inducing an inferiority complex among the Flemings which still persists. The northern Flemish area has since expanded in wealth and population, leaving the French speakers nationally in the minority and on the defensive while the Flemings still demand linguistic recognition beyond the equality they won in the 1930s.

Fleming elements tend to be strongest in the Social Christian Party and the Walloons among the Socialists and Liberals, but the bitter linguistic dispute cuts across all three main parties, the Roman Catholic Church, the trade unions, and other institutions. Recent efforts by the government to compromise the difficulty by drawing a linguistic frontier across the country, leaving Brussels the only officially bilingual area, have proved of no avail.

In an attempt to reach an overall settlement, the government in March 1962 established a "working group" to prepare proposals for a Flemish-Walloon "pact" that in turn would be the basis for amending the Belgian constitution in such a way as to protect the position of the Walloon minority. Initiation of the constitutional amendments would require a majority vote of both houses of Parliament, followed by national elections to choose a new parliament to vote on the actual revisions of the constitution. So far, however, the "working group" has not announced when its report will be presented to Parliament.

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only one eighth of the seats in Parliament. Again in 1958, the Liberals obtained seven of the 19 cabinet posts, although their parliamentary representation had been reduced to one tenth of the total.

The current PSC-PSB coalition is under serious strain on the linguistic issue and has failed to enact any extensive portion of its reform program except in watered-down form. The Liberals now scent a fresh opportunity for office during the next session of Parliament and are attempting by various means to enlarge their popular base and to refurbish their image and appeal.

Background of Liberal Party

The Belgian Liberal Party was organized in 1846 as an anticlerical party representing the interests of upper middle class industrial, commercial, and professional groups. Until 1894 control of the government alternated between the Liberals and the Roman Catholic party, but having little or no appeal to the mass of the population, the Liberals found themselves replaced by the Socialist in electoral strength after the introduction of modified universal manhood suffrage in 1893.

In the public mind the party has always been closely associated with French-speaking banking and business circles, although most large banks and industries have a mixture of PSC and Liberal ties. The

Federation of Belgian Industries (FIB), for example, is led by a French-speaking Social Christian; but its conservative policies often more closely reflect Liberal attitudes. The Societé Generale de Belgique (with its important connections with the Union Miniere du Haut Katanga) has PSC tendencies, whereas the Solvay chemical interests, Nagelmackers Bank, and the Brufina investment firm are predominantly Liberal. In state financial institutions, tripartite political appointments to boards of directors dilute the influence of any one political party.

The Liberal party has never had much appeal to conservative rural elements, who still vote PSC, nor has it made significant inroads into the Socialist stronghold among industrial workers.

Program of the Liberals

The Liberal party has developed no modern doctrine of its own and continues to advocate the standard laissez-faire socio-economic policies of the 19th century. It opposes all efforts to increase taxes or to reform Belgium's antiquated fiscal system, which for generations has produced neither sufficient government income nor adequate incentive for investment. The Liberals withdrew from the previous government in January 1961, when it appeared that the tax provisions of the Omnibus Bill--intended to reorganize the financial system--

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were to be implemented ahead of the austerity provisions. More recently the party has adamantly opposed the present government's fiscal reform, joining with right-wing Social Christians in the Senate Finance Committee to delay its passage and to insist on amendments which reduced both the yield and progressivity of its tax provisions.

Although having little appeal for labor, the Liberal party has fostered a small labor organization, the General Organization of Belgian Liberal Labor Unions (CGSLB), numbering about 50,000 members, and has got some of its delegates seated on joint commissions and semi-official consultative bodies along with the delegates of two big labor confederations. But conflicts of interest have often estranged the party and its satellite. The Liberal labor union's participation in the campaign for the five-day workweek was bitterly opposed by most Liberals on the grounds that it would jeopardize the existence of many small enterprises. During the 1961 election campaign the position of the party was so hostile to labor that the CGSLB boycotted the General Assembly of the party in May 1961.

Although their influence remains small, Liberal unions have registered a slight rise in voting strength among workers in larger plants, probably as a result of Socialist dissension and Liberal efforts to create a more attractive party image. In the May 1963

works council elections the Liberal unions increased their share of the vote from the 1958 figure of 3.8 percent to 6.2 percent.

Foreign and Defense Policies

Foreign policy is not a major political issue in Belgium. All three main parties favor collective security and Western solidarity in NATO and are strongly behind Belgian participation in the European Economic Community. The official PLP position is anti - De Gaulle, pro - Atlantic Alliance, and "not afraid of the US Trade Expansion Act."

Emotionally, however, the party is split on the issue of Gaullism. Some old-line Liberals, such as former party president Roger Motz, have been strong in their support of Foreign Minister Spaak's anti- De Gaulle position, while but a number of French-speaking Liberal right-wingers are drawn to De Gaulle by ties of language intensified by their fear of being submerged by Flemish population and culture. These pro - De Gaulle sentiments are shared by certain right-wing PSC elements and by those left-wing Socialists who have always been suspicious of capitalistic America. Some Liberal elements attack the Trade Expansion Act as having "protectionist" features.

Defense expenditures have been prime targets in the Liberal campaign to keep government

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spending at a minimum. The party has sharply criticized Belgium's commitment to the expensive F-104G program and has joined other opinion--left wing as well as conservative--in opposing Belgian participation in the multilateral nuclear force (MLF). As a further means of undermining the present coalition, the Liberals are not above exploiting the popular distrust of the efficiency and state of operational readiness of the Belgian Army.

While a government-appointed committee has considered proposals for improving the military establishment, the Liberals, with an eye to the next election, have come up with a more far-reaching plan for gradually transforming Belgium's NATO-committed troops from a conscript to a professional basis. The real vote-getting feature of this plan is a reduction of the term of conscription for

service within the country from twelve to six months, a popular position which embarrasses both the government parties.

Many Liberals and some right-wing PSC members have a lingering bitterness against US and UN policies in the Congo. Opinion within the Liberal party on the question of Katangan secession was deeply divided. Right-wing French-language newspapers--La Libre Belgique (Conservative Catholic), La Deniere Heure (Liberal), and Le Soir (independent but Liberal influenced)--were not only the most ardent spokesmen for Moise Tshombé but the most vituperative critics of US and UN Congo policy.

**Party Reorganization**

The loss of Liberal seats in the March 1961 election spurred a party reorganization which has been carried out at



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four Congresses since October 1961. A new party president, 48-year-old Omer Vanaudenhove, assumed control in May 1961 along with several other younger leaders such as René Dreze, Jacques Van Offelen, and Willy De Clercq.

Vanaudenhove and his "progressivists" wanted to establish the party as the "new center" in the Belgian political spectrum, first by luring the middle classes into membership and eventually by staging an "opening to the left" to broaden the party's almost negligible appeal to labor. Vanaudenhove's principal problem was to avoid taking hard positions on issues that might antagonize prospective members while not alienating his own followers by doing violence to cherished party principles. Nevertheless, the party had to change its spots at least to the extent of no longer appearing violently anticlerical or exclusively big-business. As a first step in this direction, it changed its name in October 1961 to Party of Liberty and Progress (PLP) as indicative of its receptivity to new ideas.

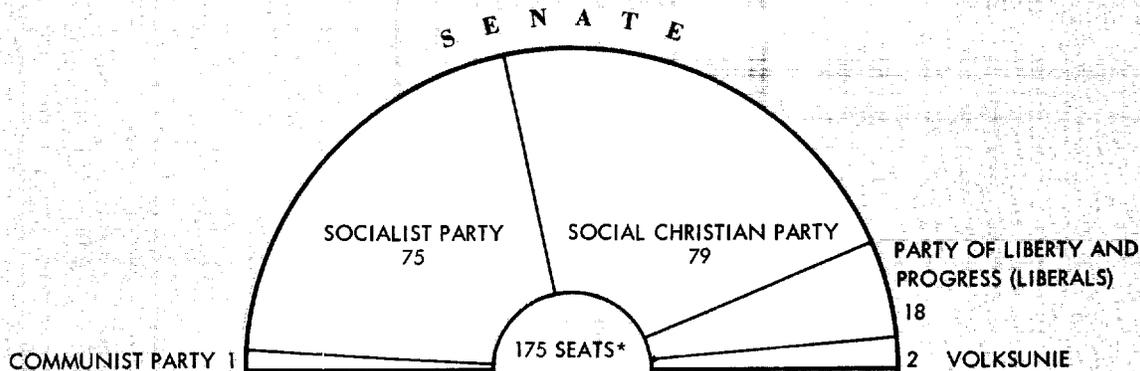
The Liberal party has always championed secular education free from domination of the Roman Catholic Church, but the three-party Schools Pact of 1958 removed this issue from the political arena and paved the way to rapprochement with right-wing Catholics, usually affluent middle-class people whose economic views often ac-

cord with Liberal doctrine. Other moves to demonstrate that a practicing Catholic can in good conscience vote Liberal include party propaganda in favor of religious tolerance and isolating old-guard anticlericals, such as ex-party president Motz, from most public activities of the party.

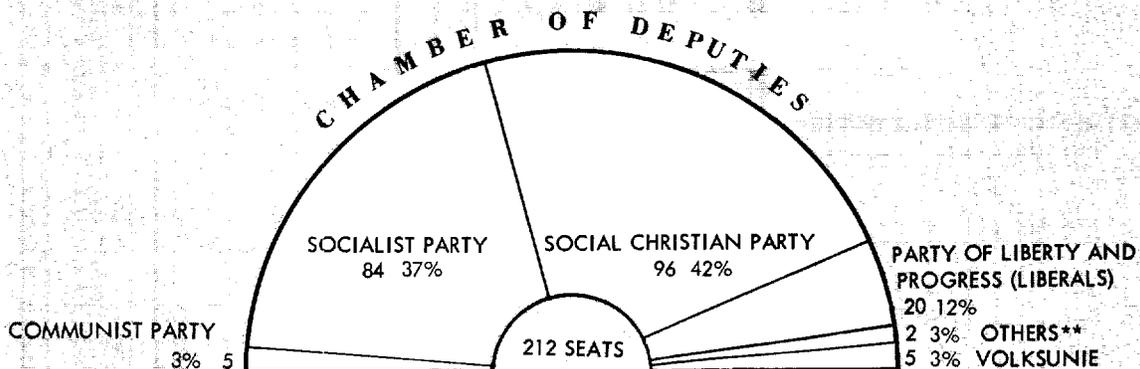
Liberals are also trying to remedy the poor discipline that has long troubled the party. Steps have been taken to increase the power of its central Political Bureau over individual members, and voting discipline in Parliament has consequently increased. The Political Bureau's new-found powers to scrutinize and alter local and regional electoral lists give it a powerful tool to discipline recalcitrant parliamentarians and to replace electoral liabilities in the party federations.

The PLP expansion drive has met with enough success to cause uneasiness within the two coalition parties. Between the October 1961 reorganization congress and the October 1962 congress, the Liberal membership, according to party announcements, rose from 46,000 to 100,000, the gain coming mostly from small parties of the far right and defectors from the right wing of the PSC. During December 1961 alone the PSC received over 3,000 resignations, among them several fairly prominent personalities, and concern within the party over such defections has recently caused a PSC cabinet minister

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**BELGIAN PARLIAMENT**  
Following Elections 26 March 1961



\*106 elected by direct vote, 46 chosen by provincial councils, 23 co-opted by the political parties.

\*\*One seat was won by the Rassemblement National, a Catholic middle-class splinter party in Brussels, and the other by a dissident Liberal in Mons. Both seats were absorbed by the Liberals at their reorganization congress in October 1961.

Figures in brown represent % of total vote.

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to remark that the shift may enable the Socialists to replace the PSC as the largest single party in Belgium after the next elections.

Noting these gains in PLP party membership and assuming a parallel gain in electoral support since the March 1961 parliamentary elections, PLP strategists calculated that by the fall of 1962 their party's share of the total national vote had risen by eight percentage points to a total of over 20 percent--a position it had not attained since 1919. In November 1962, even neutral estimates gave the Liberals, who now hold 22 of 212 seats in the Chamber of Deputies, a gain of 10 to 20 seats in the event of an immediate election.

The PLP gains in membership, however, have been largely confined to the dissidents from the far right. This has had the by-product of apparently making the PLP a competing attraction for some elements which might normally incline toward the extraparliamentary extremism of the Poujadists in France; but the votes to be gotten from extreme rightists are necessarily limited. Consequently, the PLP leadership has made new efforts to appeal to a wider middle-class vote composed of farmers, professional and white-collar workers, small property owners, and small-business proprietors--all groups resentful of the present government's pro-labor orientation.

At the May 1963 congress, Vanaudenhove presented the Liberal party as the defender of middle-class interests by establishing a Centre Nationale des Independents et des Cadres (independents and salaried executives) to act as a roof organization for the myriad professional groups that now exist independently of any political party and which have been without adequate representation either in the government or within the two larger political parties.

Prospects

Aided by the tactical advantages of an opposition party, the PLP now stands a good chance of improving its position in the next parliamentary elections, although it is uncertain how important and permanent the effects of the party reorganization will be. The PLP vote has always fluctuated more than that of the two big parties.

Dissatisfaction with recent linguistic legislation may work in the PLP's favor. In an attempt to placate new conservative Flemish Catholic members while maintaining the traditional allegiance of French-speaking Liberals, the party straddled the Flemish-Walloon question at the February 1962 party congress, and evaded responsibility by refusing to participate in the working group set up by the government to deal with the problem until allowed to do so without a commitment in advance to

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support the solution proposed by the group.

Nevertheless, the PLP has not been able to avoid entirely the Flemish-Walloon issue and other sources of intraparty dissensions. Old-guard conservatives (mostly French-speaking) have become increasingly antagonized by tactics of the younger progressive wing (mostly Fleming). Some of the extreme right-wing recruits have struck respectable business elements in the party as personally unsavory. Conservative Liberals, on the other hand, have opposed Vanaudenhove's goal of an "opening to the left" and have remained convinced that the party can grow only by assuming a clearer position on the right.

The tightening up of party discipline with its threat to the position of old-guard Liberals in the federations has left hard feelings. Moreover, nearly all the major personalities from the PSC and the right-wing splinter parties have been promised places on PLP electoral lists. If this

cannot be accomplished without sacrificing the party stalwarts, many of the new members will probably redefect. It remains problematical how far the party reorganization has widened the Liberals' electoral appeal. The new middle-class members it has attracted thus far may aid in dispelling the image of the PLP as the party of the French-speaking wealthy but not that of a party of the extreme right.

The linguistic issue makes the political situation in Belgium uncertain as well as unquiet. It is possible that a "national government" will be organized to give the projected Flemish-Walloon "pact" the assent of all three major political parties, but such a government is not required. The Liberals' best chance of participating in a government depends mainly on the Social Christians' and Socialists' finding themselves hopelessly at loggerheads over the formation of a coalition program, as they did in 1954 and 1958.

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